The Hills of Strange Tales

By CLAIR PRICE.

BOMBAY and Calcutta are both great cities. I mention them in alphabetical order, since to mention them in any less neutral order of precedence might be asking for trouble. For if you happen to be staying at the Taj Mahal in Bombay you will learn at once that Bombay is the greatest city in the Indian Empire and that Calcutta's day is ended. And if you happen to be stopping at the Great Eastern in Calcutta, you will discover that Greater Calcutta, including Howrah on the Brooklyn side of the Hoogly, is not only the greatest city in India but always has been, and that Bombay is a youngster which some day may grow up into a right good little town. To be quite neutral, all that an outsider can really say of them is that both are great cities and both are uncertain in their own minds whether they belong to the East or the West.

But there are no such uncertainties at Jamrud. While the great city of Calcutta lies 1,000 miles due east as the crow flies from the great city of Bombay, Jamrud which is no city at all, lies 1,200 miles due north from Bombay at the very top of the map, although the Bombay-Baroda and North-Western lines cover some 1,700 miles in reaching it via Delhi and then drop their passengers at Peshawar, a dozen miles below Jamrud. From Peshawar to Jamrud, the Army operates the railroad and civilian traffic is not encouraged.

Jamrud is railhead. What railhead means may not be readily comprehended by those whose lives are not pinned to railhead. Jamrud station, for instance, consists of a platform with a hut at which Army movement orders are stamped, and a low square station building near by, with no windows but loopholes, with no stairways but a ladder outside which may be drawn up, with no simple door but a massive iron-bound gate which admits to a walled courtyard within. And if it has a telephone, it also has a wireless; if uniforms are issued to its staff, rifles are also issued to them; and if the thud of a bullet on the wall outside wakes them in the night occasionally it indicates that somebody's shutter is loose and a bar of light is visible from without. There is no uncertainty in Jamrud's mind whether it belongs to the East or the West. Its fortress-station belongs to the West and all the rest of it belongs to the East.

Jamrud confronts the Khyber Pass, a narrow cut through that crowd of sun-flogged hills which sit in sullen silence with their knees hunched up, looking down on the northwest frontier of India. The northwest frontier province contains the only unconquered territory remaining on the Indian peninsula. It is a No Man's Land across which all of India's numerous invaders have descended to India's fat plains, until that day when the British committed the miracle of entering India from across the seas. To-day, however, Czarist Russia is dead, Afghanistan is on its good behavior, and only the Khyber Pass retains an actual military value. Across the rest of the frontier province, no problem remains except that of protecting the heavy caravan traffic and the cis-frontier villages from raids—only that and nothing more.

Armies are very old and by this time there is hardly any emergency which they have not rehearsed at maneuvers. There is hardly any country which they have not mapped, hardly any frontier in which they have not built up a body of tried and proven doctrine. But the northwest frontier of India is still the Sphinx of all the frontiers. Possibly ten years ago it was the most important frontier in the world. Certainly to-day it is the most insoluble.

The frontier province is a long strip of country between the Indus River and the Afghan frontier, which slants diagonally across the map from northeast to southwest, about 400 miles long at its longest and 275 miles wide at its widest. It consists of 39,000 rough and thankless square miles tilting up toward the great heights of the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan, a spur of the highest mountains in the world. It is peopled by about 3,800,000 tribesmen of whom sixty per cent. in the villages and fifty-three per cent. in the "rural areas" are men. Opinions among the British differ about them. Some hold that when Satan was expelled from Paradise, he went to live on the northwest frontier and that the modern Afridis and Wazirs and Mohmands are his lineal descendants. Others accept this belief with reserve, holding it to be more probable that a double portion of original sin was conferred on the frontier tribes at the creation.

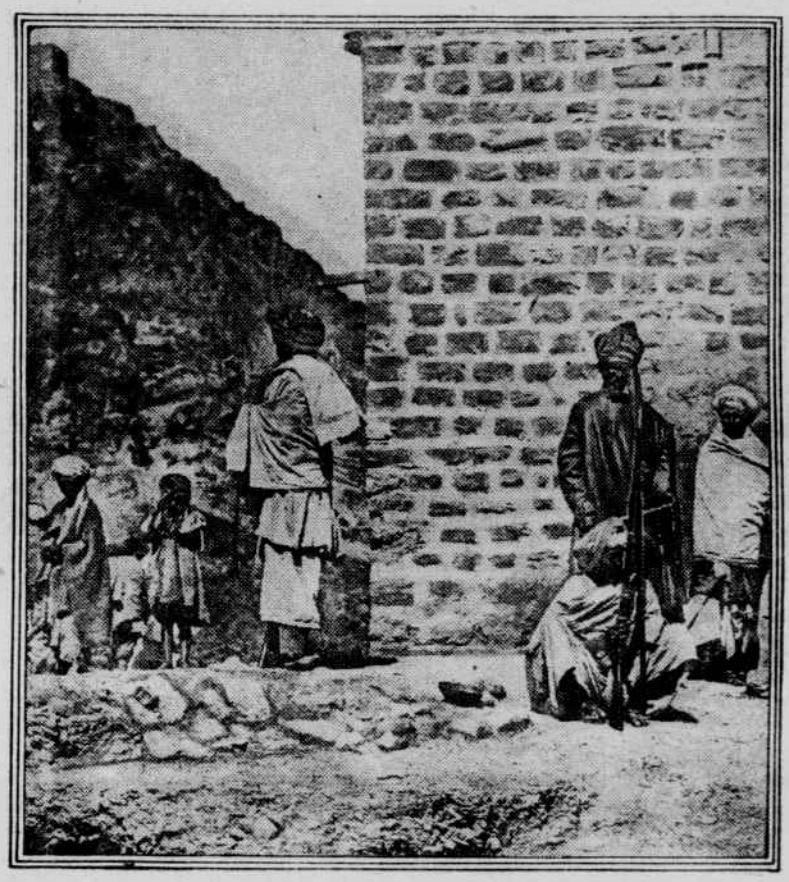
Briefly, every tribesman is an emperor in embryo, equipped with a heavy Afghan knife with which to carve out his imperial destiny. He knows how to hold a Hindu stationmaster down on his office table, cut off his arms at the elbows, burn the stumps to stop the bleeding, make his wife a present of her husband's hands, and vanish as swiftly and suddenly as if he had never existed. He knows how to fight both in his own fashion, which consists in knifing a man in the back, and in the Western fashion, which consists in knifing him in front. He never forgets an injury and he never forgets a favor. He has been known to ambush British officers and to kill them slowly in ways which are not nice to think about. And he has also been known to fight obscure little rear guard actions all by himself to cover a British officer's retreat, and to die standing up when there was no especial reason why he should have done so. Briefly,

"He is all right if you know him,

"But you've got to know him first."

The source of his troubles with the British is the same economic source as most of the world's troubles arise from. His hills do not produce enough for him to live on. He is forced to import most of his living from India but his native rocks produce nothing with which to pay for his imports. The result is raids, a military term which denotes theft on a large and more or less organized scale. He will steal anything, for stealing is the "invisible factor" by which he pays for his imports. In fact you are likely to be personally stolen if you venture outdoors after dark on the frontier, although the British are discouraging the payment of ransom in an effort to put an end to the kidnaping business. Whether he is lying behind a rock potting at a passing caravan below him on the chance of being able to slip down after dark and strip a bit of loot off a dead camel, or reconnoitering a regimental guardroom with rifles in it for down in India, he is the most accomplished thief in the world. This statement may sound like empty hyperbole but an instance may put a modicum of meaning into it.

I recall a British officer who lately handed over his post on the frontier and came away on leave. His relief had spent some fifteen years in India, but he was new to the northwest frontier. They met at Flashmans in Peshawar and the talk naturally turned to the frontier. The veteran had handed over his Afridi servant to his relief and the talk moved on to the necessity of taking reasonable precautions if one was not to be looted of one's very teeth before leaving the frontier. This sort of talk the relief appeared to regard as unnecessary; had he not spent a matter of fifteen years in India himself? The veteran contemplated his relief with a puzzled air until coffee arrived, then he offered to wager a champagne dinner with his relief that his Afridi servant that very night would steal the sheet off his bed while he—the newcomer—slept on it. This offer the relief greeted with prolonged laughter. No man could steal the sheet out from under him without waking him, and if there was any doubt whatever about that, he proposed to settle it by not going to sleep at all. He would fill himself with coffee until midnight and would then go to his bed to sit up and read until dawn. If he could win a champagne supper by merely staying awake all night, he counted himself in the greatest of luck. So the bet was made, the Afridi servant was duly told of it, and at midnight the relief went off to his room, filled with black coffee and ready to stay awake a week if necessary.



At the Khyber Pass.

In his room, he moved a pile of magazines to his bedside and with the light at his head and the mosquito netting arranged about him, he tossed the bed clothes down to the foot and sat up in his pillows with the top magazine off the pile to keep him company. The sheet was under him and he proposed to see that it remained under him. So the hours passed until about 5 o'clock when he stopped yawning and dozed off. And at 8 o'clock he woke in broad daylight to find that he was lying on the bare mattress and his Afridi servant was gravely entering the room with his sheet neatly folded on the tray beside his tea.

So the relief gave his champagne dinner that night and moved on the next day to his post at Jamrud in a chastened and humble spirit, which is the proper spirit in which to report on the northwest frontier. (If the matter be of any interest, this is how the Afridi did it: He waited at the door until he saw the Sahib drop off to sleep about 5 o'clock. Then he entered the room, lifted the mosquito netting and folded the sheet up close to the sleeping Sahib on both sides, until the sleeper slept on a twelve inch strip of folded sheet. Then he tickled the Sahib's ear as lightly as if a mosquito had come through the netting and the instant he moved in his sleep, the sheet beneath him was folded over again until he finally lay on a six inch strip of folded sheet. Then the Sahib's ear was tickled again and the instant he moved off the narrow strip of sheet altogether, the trick was done. And that is as true as any story that ever came out of the frontier.

In the raiding industry by which the tribesman lives, his tool is his rifle. The latest estimate of the number of rifles on the frontier is 170,000, with millions of rounds of ammunition to supply them. The figure is necessarily a guess, but in all probability there are more rifles on the frontier to-day than there have ever been before. Most of them were acquired either in 1919 when large numbers of frontier irregulars deserted the British at the time of the Anglo-Afghan war, or after the signature of the Anglo-Russian treaty of 1907.

A certain European Power whose capital is not a thousand miles from a town called Paris, resented its exclusion from that famous settlement by instituting a gun running traffic from the Persian Gulf overland to the frontier, a traffic which the British took steps to suppress in 1910 but which was not finally ended until the signature of a belated agreement concerning trade rights at Muscat in the Gulf, after the war broke out in 1914. Between 1907 and 1910, however, about 90,000 rifles are supposed to have been run through from the Gulf to the frontier. Among them are known to have been 30,000 Martini-Henrys which had been discarded by the Australian and New Zealand militias and which were run through in a single consignment. Others have been stolen in raids on British military convoys or lifted down in India from the guard houses of regiments newly arrived from England and not yet aware that rifle stealing is India's favorite outdoor sport. Others have been issued by the British to supposed friendlies in near by countries, hundreds of those issued in northern Persia during the boom days of 1919 having turned up on the frontier. A few are made on the frontier. In fact, the only known industry on the frontier is the little Kohat Pass arms factory, a roadside shed standing in a little salient of non-British territory crossed by the Rawalpindi-Kohat road, in which about 400 rifles a year are produced. The British know about it and frequently point it out to visitors as a curiosity. Doubtless they could suppress it, but the official view is that it would only turn up further back in the hills, where it could not be watched. So there it stays.

India's northwest frontier is one of the world's greatest rifle markets, sucking in its supply by underground sources from all over Asia. Rifles are a passion on the frontier. If there were any possibility of giving the tribes regular work and regular pay, this passion for rifles would not matter so much, for the necessity of using them in raids would not arise. Time and again when the British have enrolled the tribesmen as irregulars they have settled down at once, but in time of trouble, such as the Afghan war of 1919, instead of being relieved by regulars immediately, they have been left on their own while the regulars mobilized in their rear and while their relatives were frantically summoning them home to protect their villages against Afghan looters; or worse still, they have been ordered to withdraw, leaving their families unprotected. The result is wholesale desertions of irregulars who take their rifles with them. By the time the regulars finally do come up, the frontier is filled with well armed and well trained deserters who are quickly swept into service against the British. And things on the frontier are back at the beginning again, with the highly expensive regulars waging a highly expensive campaign, with the Legislative

Continued on Page Fourteen.